

# The Spirit is Willing but the Flesh is Weak

ONE of the most spiritually and emotionally distressing times for the Lord Jesus Christ was in the garden of Gethsemane. Immediately before his arrest and crucifixion, it was a time of fervent prayer for the Son of God, an example which he wanted to see his disciples practising too.

However, Jesus found his disciples were sleeping during this time of excruciating trial. The explanation of such behaviour was captured poignantly by Christ:

*The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak (Matthew 26:41).*

This profound statement is very helpful for us to consider. It explains why we can so readily relate to the disciples' experience of weakness; failing often to do the right things despite truly desiring to be spiritual.

*Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to the disciples, "Sit here while I go and pray over there." And he took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and he began to be sorrowful and*



*deeply distressed. Then he said to them, "My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death. Stay here and watch with me" (Matthew 26:36–38).*

Here the narrative emphasises to us how deeply distressed Jesus was, which is then underlined by his emotional statement that he was 'exceedingly sorrowful, even to death'. Such a time of extreme sorrow for the Master surely would have made it more likely to bring out the spiritual qualities in his disciples; surely they could have kept his request to keep watch with him?

*He went a little farther and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, "O my Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not*

*as I will, but as You will.” Then he came to the disciples and found them asleep, and said to Peter, “What? Could you not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matthew 26:39–41).*

## A Sobering Example

The disciples did not even manage to watch with their Lord for one hour. A part of us may find it tempting to judge them for their shortcomings, but a moment’s reflection will tell us that we also would have fallen asleep. For we are all weak at times when we should be strong; doing the right thing can seem just too hard.

Remarkably, even in his time of trial, Jesus’ concern was for his disciples’ spiritual well-being and he again instructed them to ‘keep watching and praying’. This was to help them avoid temptation, and surely the same principle applies to us if we are trying to follow Jesus. The best way to combat temptation is through prayer to God. We will frequently be tempted to do the wrong things however, because of our humanity. As Jesus taught, ‘the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak’.

## Spiritual Lessons

To help us understand better what Jesus meant, we can look to other parts of the Bible, particularly to the letter to the Romans, which provides a helpful commentary on this hugely significant theme.

The language of ‘spirit’ and ‘flesh’ occurs frequently in Romans 7 and 8. It is used to explain the battle inside any believer: the conflict between the desire to be obedient to God and the natural inclination to do whatever we like. For example, in chapter 7 we read:

*For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin. For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do (Romans 7:14–15).*

How comforting these words are to us as we can appreciate that even a godly man like the Apostle Paul experienced this inward battle to live a spiritual life in Christ. Paul continues:

*For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good. For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members... So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin (Romans 7:18–25).*

We can clearly see the connection from these passages to the experience of the disciples in Gethsemane. Paul’s spirit was willing but his flesh was weak. He uses the



picture of two conflicting forces in his mind – this is his human nature fighting his desire to obey God.

The similarities continue in chapter 8 as again we read about flesh being related to weakness (verse 3) and of how we can call God ‘Abba, Father’ (verse 15) which is exactly the title Jesus used to address God in Gethsemane (Mark 14:36). Finally, by comparing Romans 7 and 8 with Jesus in Gethsemane it may help to explain why the topic of prayer is introduced in Romans 8:26 as we have already seen how important prayer was in Gethsemane.

## Responding as Spiritual People

When we read of Jesus’ experience in Gethsemane, we can learn to be more thankful for the suffering which he went through in order to save his people from their sins – this includes us, if we choose to follow him.

We can appreciate the importance of prayer during times of trial and sorrow,

and we can also understand more about the condition in which we all find ourselves – desiring to do good, but being unable to because of the weakness of our flesh (our human nature).

Thankfully, God sent His own Son:

*...in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: he condemned sin in the flesh (Romans 8:3).*

Jesus overcame sin and died to become free from the natural desires of the flesh. We too must die – in symbol – by being baptised into his death, so that we can share in his victory over both sin and death (Romans 6:1-5). There is no other way to live the life of the Spirit and cease to live according to the inclinations of the flesh



We can humbly and joyfully give thanks with Paul who wrote:

*O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God – through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Romans 7:24–25).*

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